DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 386 674 CG 026 555

AUTHOR Young, Susan L.
TITLE Powerlessness Reinterpreted: Reframing Step One.
PUB DATE [Jan 95]
NOTE 27p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adults; Alcohol Abuse; *Alcoholism; Coping; Counseling Techniques; *Counseling Theories; *Individual Power; Self Control; Self Determination
IDENTIFIERS *12 Step Programs; *Alcoholics Anonymous; Self Empowerment; Spirituality

ABSTRACT

The 12 steps of the well-known mutual help group, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), begin with Step One, admitting powerlessness. Although Step One has helped many problem drinkers and other addicts, its spiritual concepts have been criticized. The possibility of reconceptualizing powerlessness as empowering, not only within AA and its offshoot programs, but also in selected counseling models (Jungian Psychology, Kasl's Sixteen Steps to Empowerment, Transactional Analysis, Transpersonal theme, Robbins & Mortifee's model) is examined here. Major texts from AA were compared with selected psychological models of change. Implications for the field of counseling were: (1) AA, having helped many addicts, could provide important healing tools for our culture as it has been seen as an addictive system; and (2) reconciling AA's powerlessness with counseling's empowerment models can enrich the effectiveness of both. Appendices include AA's Twelve Steps to Recovery and Kasl's Sixteen Steps for Discovery and Empowerment. Contains 40 references. (JBJ)

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Powerlessness Reinterpreted:

Reframing Step One

Susan L. Young

University of Southern Maine

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Abstract

The twelve steps of the well-known mutual help group, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), begin with Step One, admitting powerlessness. Although Step One has helped many problem drinkers and other addicts, its spiritual concepts have been criticized. This paper explored the possibility of reconceptualizing powerlessness as empowering, not only within AA and its offshoot programs, but also in selected counseling models. Major texts from AA were compared with selected psychological models of change, leading to implications for the field of counseling.

Powerlessness Reinterpreted:
Reframing Step One

Grant me the serenity to accept

the things I cannot change.

Words which open AA meetings (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc. [AA], 1975, p. 18)

Riordan and Walsh (1994) noted that Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and its twelve steps to recovery from addiction are commonly cited by professionals as one of the most effective treatment choices; with over two million members worldwide, there is much success. Yet the description of AA as a program offering a spiritual remedy (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services [AA], 1976, p. xvi) has been a stumbling block to many newcomers both to the AA program and to recovery from alcoholism. On the one hand, the literature from AA clearly states "AA's Twelve Steps are a group of principles, spiritual in their nature, which, if practiced as a way of life, can expel the obsession to drink and enable the sufferer to become happily and usefully whole" (AA, 1952, p. 15). But many people do not keep coming back, and instead leave the program in skepticism without reaping its benefits because they tend to translate "spiritual" as "religious" (AA, 1985, p. 1).

> Statistics from 1987 cited in Dawes (1991) stated: alcohol use creates problems for an estimated 18 million persons 18 years and older in the United States. Cirrhosis is the ninth leading cause of death; nearly half of all accidental deaths, suicides, and homicides are alcohol related; and nearly half of convicted jail inmates were intoxicated when they committed the crime. (p. 13)

And Anderson (1992) reports: "Although there have been other attempts to treat alcohol dependence as a disease, the movement which has had the most significant impact is Alcoholics Anonymous, which traces its beginnings to the spiritual awakening and subsequent recovery of 'Dr. Bob' and 'Bill W.'" (p. 163). Thus, people seeking help who leave AA prematurely may be sacrificing an important resource for themselves as well as potentially jeapordizing the safety of the greater population.

According to Hanna (1992), many non-professionals leave AA because of difficulty accepting its spiritual principles, and many professional mental health workers may resist AA's quasi-religious nature. Hanna (1992) presents a compelling argument for counselors to look more deeply into the essence of the steps and towards integration with their own models:

> At some point in the mental health counselor's career, it is inevitable that he or she will encounter Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) or other programs built on the 12-step approach....Ideological differences between AA and mental health professionals can be of considerable magnitude... These differences can hinder recognition of AA's similarity to various aspects of the professional literature. The necessity for establishing and maintaining relationships with AA, recovering clients, and recovering colleagues should cause the professionally trained mental health counselor to seek ways to bridge the ideological gap that separates them. (pp. 166-167)

People coming into recovery and adulthood in the 1990's are faced with many choices. Various theoretical models of growth and transformation are available to both professional helpers and those desiring help. Among many others, the choices for the seeker include "joining AA, entering inpatient treatment, entering outpatient treatment, going 'cold turkey,' joining religious groups, going to a state hospital" (Dawes, 1991, p. 13). Twelve Step programs are available at any time of day and night, accessible in many public buildings, and free. Yet, feminist, rationalist, and New Age criticism has been

widespread against AA's concept of powerlessness, accusing 12-step-based programs of being misogynistic, male-oriented, antirational, anachronistic, patriarchal, sexist, and based on the fall-redemption model of fundamentalist Christian dogma and evangelical brainwashing (Judge, 1994; Kasl, 1991; Kasl, 1992; Peele, 1985; Salamone, 1994; Samet, 1993; Swan, 1989; Trimpey, 1989; Unterberger, 1989; Williams & Laird, 1992).

Nonetheless, considering spiritual matters may be important for its potential to improve counseling programs, services and relationships. According to Holst (1992), it is to the advantage of the helpee to have the helper keep a spiritual focus in mind, even if covertly. The counselor functioning as a group therapy leader, an alcoholism counselor, a crisis intervener, a marriage therapist, or an individual psychotherapist can employ specific clinical skills and methods while still keeping in mind the participation of a general intangible force larger than him/herself. Holst (1992) declared that this involvement of a spiritual presence is often likely to be nonverbal, that is communicated covertly through the relationship.

Nevertheless, even a major text for AA, (AA, 1952) pointed out that we all avoid spiritual development: "Who

cares to admit complete defeat? Practically no one, of course. Every natural instinct cries out against the idea of personal powerlessness" (p. 21). Therefore, the potential exists for much confusion by what seem to be very different world views. In coming to a decision of which path to embrace, however, those explorers who discover the essence of various theoretical frameworks may ascertain similarities even among apparently very divergent perspectives, both Eastern and Western.

Corsini (1989) believes that all good therapists are eclectic. Similarly, according to Nobel Peace Prize nominee Thich Nhat Hahn (1990), the most important Buddhist teaching is that of non-duality. Thus if the schools of empowerment and powerlessness could realize the nature of interbeing in each other, nothing needs to be thrown out by any therapist. Like Thich Nhat Hahn (1990), this paper invites "psychotherapists to contemplate the practice of psychotherapy as an expression of non-duality. We can accept everything" (p. 194).

Step One clearly states, "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol" (AA, 1952, p.5). Questions arise as to whether AA's process of admitting powerlessness can be reconciled with more current empowerment models like those of psychologists and counselors Arredondo (1992),

Bowen, Bahrick, & Enns (1991), Gershon and Straub (1989), Lee (1991), and McWhirter (1991). For example, can acknowledging weakness lead to strength? Does admitting powerlessness lead to empowerment? Instead of being mutually exclusive, could these two paradigms be somehow interdependent? Assuming that "most contemporary models of counseling and therapy operate on the basic assumption that clients are able to accept personal responsibility," (Corey, 1991, p. 3), how can counselors make sense of a client's accepting personal powerlessness? The method used to consider these questions was a comparative review of both the basic twelve step recovery literature and selected models from the field of counseling.

Literature Review

Concepts from AA

In the chapter entitled, "Bill's Story" in Alcoholics Anonymous (1939), Bill W., co-founder of AA, admitted that his unaided human will had failed him, that alone he was nothing, and that he ultimately felt totally cornered by his dependence on alcohol. Only after such humble surrender, acceptance and humility, Bill W. claimed, could he enjoy the "happiness, peace and usefulness in a way of life that is incredibly more wonderful as time passes" (AA, 1939, p. 8). This step, simple but not easy, forms

the foundation from which the whole AA program and its members' lives grow. From within the organization, AA (1939) is seen positively by 12-steppers as an experiential, sensible program. Step One is seen as desirable. In the remaining sections, Step One will be reframed in relation to various other conceptual schemes.

Jungian Psychology

Jungian psychologist Richard Grant (1990) claimed that the practical, action-oriented twelve steps relate to change in the deep psyche, called the unconscious. The steps, according to Grant (1990), are not only pragmatic, "They also have deep reverberations in the unconscious, because they really do transform not only external behavior, but also the deeper, older, reflex-like parts of ourselves" (p. 6).

Indeed, AA claims Jungian psychology as a basis for its beginnings (AA, 1939; Hannah, 1992; Z., 1990). All three sources reviewed AA's history: Bill W. corresponded with Carl Jung, who wrote that in his view only a profound spiritual change could relieve the obsession to drink, which Jung conceptualized more richly as a craving for higher consciousness. Adlerians share this view emphasizing behavior as purposeful (Corey, 1991). The purpose of destructive behavior, according to Jung and

Bill W., is a search for a wholeness. To begin a spiritual process of restoring this wholeness to the personality, people must own their own shadow, wrote Jungian author Robert Johnson (1991). Summarizing the definitions of terms from Jungian psychology, Johnson (1991) wrote:

> The persona is what we would like to be and how we wish to be seen by the world. The ego is what we are and know about consciously. The shadow is that part of us we fail to see or know. (pp. 3-4)

Johnson (1991) also offered an original meaning of the word religion: to re-relate. In Jungian psychology, Desai (1993) wrote, Step One means to re-relate to ourselves. It is to acknowledge our helplessness in the face of what our out-of-control selves have created. He further stated that we receive power from being in new relationship to those parts of ourselves which are beyond the control of the unidimensional ego-mind. These other parts include archetypes and subpersonalities.

Johnson (1991) argued that the work of Jungian psychology is to understand and integrate the dark shadow side of the psyche so that it no longer manifests behaviorally and problematically, often in addictive ways. As quoted in the introduction, no one likes to admit

complete defeat, and the question remains, How can an admission of powerlessness begin a transformation toward empowerment? Johnson (1991) wrote: "To suffer one's confusion is the first step in healing. Then the pain of contradiction is transformed into the mystery of paradox" (p. 76). Assuring his readers that wholeness can be reached, he urged finding the gold in the shadow. The damages that the dark, hidden aspects can create are transformed only after the shadow is brought out of denial, explored, owned, and integrated, Johnson (1991) asserted. According to both Grant (1990) and Johnson (1991), the remaining eleven steps lead to integration through the accepting and honoring of one's own shadow.

Powerlessness Reframed Therapeutically

In the counseling field, widening of the concept of powerlessness could take many forms. For example, feminist critic, psychologist and author Charlotte Kasl (1992) disagreed with the wording of Step One, and encouraged people to develop groups patterned after her sixteen steps to empowerment (Appendix B). Yet she maintained that to recover from addiction, "we must acknowledge or admit we have a problem. The purpose of admitting powerlessness is to send shock waves to the ego. 'I've got a problem. Get it? The old ways aren't working

anymore'" (Kasl, 1992, p. 308). Kasl believed that facing powerlessness results in shattering the denial of addiction's harm and the immobility an addict experiences.

Lindeman (1926), stated that:

> The first step toward liberation is taken when an individual begins to understand what inhibits, frustrates, subjugates him. Psychotherapy has taught us that the first look must be within, not without. The psychotherapeutic specialist does not "cure" his patient; he merely assists the patient in learning the methods of self-recovery. In another sense we become free when we discover the limitations and extent of our capacities.....Those individuals are free who know their powers and capacities as well as their limitations; who seek a way of life that utilizes their total personalities; who aim to alter their conduct in relation to a changing environment in which they are conscious of being active agents." (pp. 46-47, 50)

What an interesting paradox! In order to be free, we cannot ask ourselves to do what we cannot do. In this way, the idea of powerlessness is extensive: for addicts, admitting powerlessness means they can continue through the next eleven steps to recovery (AA, 193); for

clients, admitting to being frustrated, inhibited, subjugated, and limited means they are freer to know their fuller selves (Lindeman, 1926); for counselors, Kottler (1993) reminded us, "we remember how fragile the illusion of omnipotence really is" (p. 27) when we "remember the golden words, 'it is ultimately up to the client to change'" (p. 17).

The theory of Transactional Analysis as described by Dusay and Dusay (1989) includes several ego states. An active addict could be thought of as behaving from the state of the rebellious child. When the child admits not being able to reach full health if totally self-reliant, that child is open to the wisdom of the functional adult. So, after admitting defeat, an active addict is open to a power greater than the self for healing.

Social worker, mental health counselor and author Jacquelyn Small (1982) contended that Step One means we are powerless when we are under the control of the ego alone. She restated the first step to say: "In the past I've allowed an addicted partial self to rule me, and it cannot control its use of alcohol. I am now putting a stop to this dictatorship" (Small, 1982, p. 210). This then, allows for a higher, truer self to emerge. For Small, admitting powerlessness is not giving away power,

rather it sets the stage for the receiving and accepting of it by becoming identified with the totality of all parts of the self: addict and non-addict; child, adult and parent.

This link is further exemplified by the spiritual awakenings of mystics as described by psychiatrist Arthur Deikman (1982): "The sages describe a Way that leads to a higher level of existence, one infinitely more desirable than the level in which most people conduct their lives" (p. 3).

Considered in this way, Step One urges a shift in consciousness and motivation from the egocentric to a power larger than oneself (Desai, 1993). It lays the groundwork for a move toward Higher Consciousness, the very basis for the field of transpersonal psychology as described by Wilber (1979). "Acceptance is another common transpersonal theme. Acceptance is the key to serenity and contentedness. It allows a person to relax and to cease fighting persons or conditions in the world and grow through them" (Hannah, 1992, p. 174).

In the model of Robbins and Mortifee (1991), both empowerment and powerlessness play important roles. For them, it is in acceptance that the mind and heart become free. The connection between powerlessness and

transformation is in the surrender; the ability to be willing to not know, but to trust, to sense, and to give way to a Higher Power, by saying, "Thy will, not mine be done" (Robbins & Mortifee, 1991, p. 47).

Conclusion

...For thine is the.....power...

(words which end AA meetings) (Moran, 1992, p.70)

The ideas which emerged from the review of AA literature and from selected models in the counseling field can be summarized in statements which transcend their apparent differences. Denial of our addictions or limitations further limits us. Step One, or an admission of the powerlessness of our ego-selves, can lead to self-empowerment. In both AA and in counseling, somewhere along the way, the client lets go of familiar controls. In this new reinterpretation, giving up does not mean failure, as we have been conditioned to believe. Connecting both models, this most important first step means living without the certainty of what we have known. It leads to comfort with the paradoxes of life.

An implication for the reconciliation proposed in this paper reaches even further than professional helpers counseling only problem drinkers. Anne Wilson-Schaef (1987) proposed that the very fabric of our culture is an

addictive system. Thus Hannah (1992) notes, that AA, having helped many addicts, could provide important healing tools that deserve inquiry. Step One of AA may ultimately also serve many clients in this society.

Further implications for counselors are based in the belief that reconciling AA's powerlessness with counseling's empowerment models can enrich the effectiveness of both. Through this investigation, a benefit may exist for people who live and/or work with addicts or those in an addictive system. They may more likely be open to the possibility of the spiritual core of addiction, and, therefore, to the inclusion of spiritual principles in recovery. In a larger sense, the differing perspectives and interpretations offered may inspire some people--addict or non-addict, helper or helpee--to proceed with a personal spiritual journey, beginning with an admission of powerlessness, despite initial misgivings.

Openmindedly looking "past the words to the broader concepts" (Salamone, 1994, p. 19), it appears that AA's Step One and the counseling field do indeed share common underpinnings. Both are growth-oriented; both are based in psychology; both begin with the assumption that change is a goal and that receiving help is part of the process. The following two quotations, one from each paradigm,

demonstrate and summarize the similarities:

> But upon entering AA, we soon took quite another view of this absolute humiliation. We perceive that only through utter defeat are we able to take our first step toward liberation and strength. Our admissions of personal powerlessness finally turn out to be the firm bedrock upon which happy and purposeful lives may be built. (AA, 1952, p. 21)
>
> The moment of descent and discovery begins at the moment you consciously become dissatisfied with life...Concealed within this basic unhappiness with life and existence is the embryo of a growing intelligence, a special intelligence...A person who is beginning to sense the suffering of life is, at the same time, beginning to *awaken* to deeper realities, truer realities. For suffering smashes to pieces the complacency of our normal fictions about reality, and forces us to become alive in a special sense--to see carefully, to feel deeply, to touch ourselves and our worlds in ways we have heretofore avoided. It has been said, and I truly think, that suffering is the first grace. In a special sense, suffering is almost a time of rejoicing, for it marks the birth of creative insight. (Wilber, 1979, p. 85)

When viewed from beyond duality, there is no predicament for AA members or the field of counseling. Because of the true nature of paradox, both powerlessness and empowerment co-exist. Neither a judgment nor a moral issue, powerlessness is merely a fact of the limitations of our human condition. However, using limits to stay limited or to become more limited is not what Step One or AA encourages. Honestly admitting powerlessness is not meant to be restrictive, rather its intent is to give vision for greater possibilities. It is expansive. Removing a major obstacle to attainment of personal goals, Step One opens the space for productive work to proceed. It allows for willingly "going with the flow, letting it happen, and the promise of surrender's blissful awakening" (Grenager, 1994, pp. 28-29).

Appendix A

The Twelve Steps (AA., 1985, p. 121)

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol--that our lives had become unmanageable.

2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.

4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being, the exact nature of our wrongs.

6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Appendix B

Sixteen Steps for Discovery and Empowerment
(Kasl, 1992, 338-339)

1. We affirm we have the power to take charge of our lives and stop being dependent of substances or other people for our self-esteem and security.

2. We come to believe that God/the Goddess/Universe/Great Spirit/Higher Power awakens the healing wisdom within us when we open ourselves to that power.

3. We make a decision to become our authentic Selves and trust in the healing power of truth.

4. We examine our beliefs, addictions, and dependent behavior in the context of living in a hierarchal, patriarchal culture.

5. We share with another person and the Universe all those things inside of us for which we feel shame and guilt.

6. We affirm and enjoy our strengths, talents, and creativity, striving not to hide these qualities to protect others' egos.

7. We become willing to let go of shame, guilt, and any behavior that keeps us from loving ourSelves and others.

8. We make a list of people we have harmed and people who have harmed us, and take steps to clear out negative energy by making amends and sharing our grievances in a respectful way.

9. We express love and gratitude to others and increasingly appreciate the wonder of life and the blessings we *do* have.

10. We continue to trust our reality and daily affirm that we see what we see, we know what we know, and we feel what we feel.

11. We promptly acknowledge our mistakes and make amends when appropriate, but we do not say we are sorry for things we have not done and we do not cover up, analyze, or take responsibility for the shortcomings of others.

12. We seek out situations, jobs, and people that affirm our intelligence, perceptions, and self-worth and avoid situations or people who are hurtful, harmful, or demeaning to us.

13. We take steps to heal our physical bodies, organize our lives, reduce stress, and have fun.

14. We seek to find our inward calling, and develop the will and wisdom to follow it.

15. We accept the ups and downs of life as natural events that can be used as lessons for our growth.

16. We grow in awareness that we are interrelated with all living things, and we contribute to restoring peace and balance of the planet.

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